

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – 2nd Sunday of Advent – 6th December 2020

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Today we celebrate John the Baptist, at first glance rather a strange character when viewed with 21st century eyes. Born to old parents, dressed in camel skins which must surely have been a tad whiffy in the heat, eating locusts and wild honey, drinking only water and living in the wilderness, shouting about the need to live better lives because a new superhero was on the way who would save the world. If he was around today he'd probably be sectioned and treated for mental health issues.

But as always there are many layers to the accounts of John the Baptist. Right from the start, he is a special baby, born to Elizabeth, a relative of Mary. He was only six months older than Jesus, and we read in other gospel stories that before he was born he "leapt in the womb" when Mary, newly pregnant with Jesus, arrived to see Elizabeth. He dresses like Elijah, one of the greatest of all the prophets, equal to Moses, who performed great miracles and spoke out against the Israelites worshipping false gods. The Israelites believed that Elijah would return just before God re-appears to them. It's been 400 years since the Israelites had a prophet and now they had one – one who could well be Elijah. He only eats locusts and wild honey, which also places him in amongst the prophets like Daniel.

John lived in the wilderness, but drew thousands to see him and hear him as he preached repentance and urged the people to turn to God, to change their lives before it was too late. People flocked out of the towns and cities to see him and hear him. Why? It wasn't as though that would have been an easy trip – they had no cars or trains or buses, they would have had to go by horse or donkey or by foot, taking food and water with them. And why did he live in the wilderness, where people had to go to considerable trouble to get to him, instead of going round the towns and villages himself, to reach as many people as possible? Well, the

wilderness had special meaning to the Jewish people – it was to the freedom of the wilderness that God led them from their slavery in Egypt, where they became a nation. But also the wilderness has a special attraction to people in towns – they dream of the countryside as peaceful, beautiful, with a slower pace of life and safer than the cities. People still go to the city, especially youngsters, in search of money and excitement, but as they get older they hanker after the more rural pace of life, slower, with more time to get to know your neighbours. We saw it recently when the second confinement was announced – over 700 kilometres of traffic jams as people left Paris to head for the countryside.

So people go to hear John, and he has a following of disciples, and everyone is stunned by his prophetic power. His message is the last of the wake-up calls, for people to turn their lives around and be ready when God comes. It's urgent, it's about to happen, there is very little time left. Repentance is about turning your life around, about leaving behind the old life submerged in needing more money, more things, and doing harm to others whether intentionally or not. And John baptizes the people in the river Jordan, as a symbol of leaving behind their old and sinful lives and moving into a new life following God. It's a new Exodus, leaving behind the slavery of sin, into a new life.

John, like all the prophets, is not afraid to speak out about where the people have gone wrong. Their priests and leaders too come in for his criticism, and later on we see that his fearless condemnation of the relationship between Herod and his wife Herodias, leads to his death. He wasn't afraid (or perhaps he was but felt compelled anyway by God) to speak out against evil, and wrongdoing. We don't hear much these days about evil, we call it all sorts of other things. The mass killing of people who happen to be of a different racial group is called genocide, or ethnic cleansing. Attacking people and injuring them is called assault, or abuse. People in authority stealing from the very people they are elected or appointed by are called corrupt. Politicians inciting people to riot or do violence are called rabble rousers. The list goes on – but in plain English, these people are murderers, thieves, and are doing evil things. Evil isn't something we talk about, and last week after the service some of us had an interesting discussion about whether evil exists. We concluded that you only have to look around you to see that it does, but few people call it out. I read on the news that a brave official in America has stood up and said that President Trump is inciting violence and it has to stop. He'll probably lose his

job for that, as have other officials recently. But he had the courage to speak out about what he sees is wrong.

Greta Thunberg, David Attenborough, Prince Charles, are all modern-day prophets, speaking out about how we are killing the very planet on which we live. It's not comfortable hearing, and you might say it's not evil – but we are busy eradicating all life in the pursuit of what? More stuff to possess, when half the world has nothing? Just to read the news is to see that evil does exist in our world, in all manner of forms. The pandemic isn't just infecting people, it's also shining a spotlight on other evil – deliberate infecting of people, a sharp rise in domestic violence in the home, more poverty and hardship as people cannot pay their bills, feed their children or heat their houses, losing their jobs as recession bites whilst others live in the lap of luxury with private yachts.

And what would John the Baptist have to say about the world we live in now? Would he be pleased to see that not only the Jewish people but all people have taken his call to repentance seriously, to stop doing evil and to follow God, and are now all on the right path? Or would he see the same old mess and muddle, with evil still happily seated at our dinner table?

Evil does exist in this world and if we really are Christians, it's up to us to take a stand, like John and all the other prophets. Christ came to take away the sin of the world. He didn't come as a great General, to fight and kill, but as a new born baby, born into an ordinary family. He came to show us once and for all how to live our lives in love and peace, how the only way to defeat evil is by doing good, not only to the people we love, but the people we really rather dislike at times. It's not an easy path that we take when we follow him, sometimes it's frightening, but we know the difference between good and evil deep down, we know the difference between right and wrong. We don't need to live in the woods, wearing itchy camel skins and eating bugs, but we do need to remember that John the Baptist left us the gift of baptism. When we are baptized we turn from evil. That doesn't mean we turn our backs on it, or ignore it when we see it, but that we take it on and defeat it, speak out against it and show through our lives that God's way is the better way. Let the baby born in a stable 2000 years ago whom we worship and whose birthday we celebrate soon, be our guide. Jesus Christ, our Messiah, brother and friend, who is with us every step of the way.